



## **The Feast of the Birth of St. John the Baptist: St. Cuthbert's Delta June 29, 2014**

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### **Luke 1:57-80**

The time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown his great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her.

On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him Zechariah after his father. But his mother said, "No; he is to be called John." They said to her, "None of your relatives has this name." Then they began motioning to his father to find out what name he wanted to give him. He asked for a writing tablet and wrote, "His name is John." And all of them were amazed. Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue freed, and he began to speak, praising God. Fear came over all their neighbors, and all these things were talked about throughout the entire hill country of Judea. All who heard them pondered them and said, "What then will this child become?" For, indeed, the hand of the Lord was with him. Then his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke this prophecy:

"Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,  
for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them.  
He has raised up a mighty savior for us  
in the house of his servant David,  
as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old,  
that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us.  
Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors,  
and has remembered his holy covenant,  
the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham,  
to grant us that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies,  
might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness  
before him all our days.

And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;  
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,  
to give knowledge of salvation to his people  
by the forgiveness of their sins.  
By the tender mercy of our God,  
the dawn from on high will break upon us,  
to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,  
to guide our feet into the way of peace."  
The child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day he appeared publicly to Israel.

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I'm told that my parents' naming of my three siblings and myself went this way: First came my older sister, the firstborn of the family: my parents named her Donna after my mother. Then came my brother, the second born of the family and the one and only son: they named him Lawrence after my father. Then I, the third born, came along: they named me, Maxine after my mother's only sister who was having difficulty getting pregnant. And finally along came my little sister, their fourth and final child, and they named her a name that no one in our family had ever had.. For you see, by the time she was born they had grown weary of naming their children after family members. "Every child deserves a name of her very own!" My mother and father said to each other and to all of us as they announced that her name would be Pamela.

Luke's account of the birth of John the Baptist, like a number of other important Biblical birth stories, is all tied up with naming. We hear all about this just prior to the story we hear today of Elizabeth and Zechariah, the more elderly parents of John the Baptist.

It all starts on an ordinary day in the temple when Zechariah, a priest, is going about his normal everyday duties. On that day he is chosen by lot to go into the most sacred, mysterious and dangerous part of the temple to offer incense to God. He does this, probably with some understandable trepidation. But nothing prepares him for what happens once he's there. For there, in the very spot where he is to offer the incense, stands a terrifying angel who has news for him.

"You and Elizabeth are going to be parents," the angel tells him. "And you're going to name him John," the angel tells him.

It's a name that has a meaning all its own: it means "God favors."

But Zechariah, like so many others in Scripture who got news like this, is confused.

"How can any of this happen?" he asks.

But the angel Gabriel is not amused any more than my parents were amused when I questioned something they had asked me to do:

"It will happen because I say so," Gabriel tells him.

And just to make the point even more strongly, Gabriel adds: "Because you didn't believe me, I'm taking away your speech until both these things—the birth and the naming—actually occur!"

And this is where our passage picks up today—with Elizabeth giving birth to their baby boy, followed by the circumcision and the naming of the child. The crowd gathered for the event urges Elizabeth and Zechariah to name the boy after his father, as would have been the custom, but both Elizabeth and then Zechariah know what they need to do. They name him John meaning “God favours” and at that instant Zechariah gets his gift of gab back. But more than that, he gets the gift of song, a song that praises God for unexpected favor and mercy, for release from every fear and for a savior who will come like the dawn breaking upon those who have sat in darkness far too long.

We, you and I, have all been given our birth names for a variety of reasons. Some of us have been given names in honor or in memory of family members or friends. And some of us have been given names because they are *not* family names. But whatever the reason for our birth names, we can be sure that these are not the only names we will have along the way. Some of us will be called “Winners” while other will be called “Losers” in our lives. Some of us will be called “The Ideal Son or Daughter” while others of us will be labeled “The Black Sheep of the Family.” Some of us will be known as “Mr Right,” or “The Ideal Woman” while others of us will be called “Disasters,” and “Ne’er do Wells.”

All these names, the negative ones and the positive alike, can distort our view of ourselves in that each implies a kind of narrow and impoverished sense of who we are, one that limits who and what we might become.

But today on the Feast of the Birth of John the Baptist, we, you and I, are given a completely different way to understand being named and what it might mean for us. For the story of the naming of John the Baptist is the story of a child given a name and an identity that is not narrow or limiting. It’s the story of a child named not by his parents but by the great and loving mystery that is God.

And so this morning what would it be like for you to believe that besides the name given to you at birth, besides the names, good and bad, others have given you, that you’re also being given a name that has something to do with the role you are to play in inaugurating God’s realm here and now? This name is a name whispered to each of us by angels, a name that speaks of what God catches us up into in transforming the world into God’s own realm.

These names, given to us by God are, of course, bigger than our family name or the names others have known us by, for they are all about drawing us into something larger than ourselves, catching us up in the very action of God. Just like the name “John” which means “God favors,” each of these names is a statement with God as its subject. And just as in the story of Zechariah recovering his speech, once we acknowledge that this God-given name is our own, the soul itself bursts forth in song, praising a God who delights to catch us up in his action.

Here are some of the names. Listen for the one that might be yours.

God touches the untouchable. God reclaims the lost. God liberates the oppressed. God suffers with those who suffer. God endures when all else falls away. God surprises the settled. God dreams. God lifts up the lowly. God heals the broken-hearted. God encompasses all things. God weeps with those who mourn. God astounds. God recreates. God rejuvenates what has grown old. God reconciles. God reunites. God waits...and keeps waiting. God challenges the satisfied.

Which of these names or which other name is an angel whispering to you this morning? What divine action is God trying to catch you up in or to draw you into? And what will it mean for you to accept this name? What will it cost you? What song of praise will you be given if and when you accept it?

Parishes, of course, have names too. This one is named for St. Cuthbert, a saint who was shepherd, monk, hermit bishop and missionary: a man who with unflagging energy moved through the chances and changes of 7th century Northern England with grace and generosity of spirit. Here in this time of transition it will be important for you as a parish to remember his legacy, a legacy bound up in the specific person that he was and the specific challenges he met. But as I've suggested as it is for all of us, it will also be important for you as a parish to listen for other new names that God will be giving you in this time of change. These will not supplant your parish name but will be other reassurances and challenges—names with God as their subject—that describe the actions of God you are being caught up in as you go through the changes before you and as you discern what comes next.

Having just come through something similar myself as I left my beloved parish in Seattle, I know something of this territory. I know the grief, the perplexity, the excitement and the confusion that accompanies a time when a rector announces that he or she has taken call to a new place. And so it will be important for you to look and to listen to those angels that will appear to you and among you for the names that will be given you in this time. Listen.

Is it this: "God is faithful"? Or maybe it's this: "God recreates in the midst of loss"?

Listen. Listen for the names and know that when you speak them what will come with them is participation in God's own action. And if you wait long enough....a song of praise.